local

CINCINNATI.COM

Video: See how they do it

For a second year, does were tranquilized, operated on and released back into Clifton. How's it going?

PROVIDED/MARK EASTERLING

Does No. 23 and No. 24 were sterilized side by side the first year. They were caught grooming each other this winter by Clifton resident Mark Easterling.

Year 2 of deer sterilization thins the herd

Clifton neighbors fond of their wildlife decided there must be another way than killing them

CARRIE BLACKMORE SMITH
CSMITH@ENQUIRER.COM

During the second week of January, a team of sharpshooters with dart guns, veterinarians and volunteers quietly captured and sterilized female deer in a section of residential Clifton.

It was the second year of the Clifton Deer Fertility Control Pilot Program, which aims to thin a herd that had been growing into a destructive horde.

Three years ago, Cincinnati Parks had been considering allowing bow hunting in the northwestern corner of Clifton, which encompasses Mount Storm Park and Rawson Woods nature preserve.

But neighbors fond of their deer decided there must be another way.

Deer birth control exists, but hormones only last a few years. Then the neighborhood group read about surgical sterilization – a forever fix.

They found White Buffalo, a deer management company, which agreed to sign on to a three-year pilot. The community raised roughly $40,000 for the project's first year and gained local and state support.

After year two, they are "cautiously optimistic."

Forty-one to 10

So how'd it go?

White Buffalo President Anthony DeNicola and his team sterilized and tagged 41 does the first year, which DeNicola believed represented 90 percent of the females in the herd.

The animals were destroying the natural environment, eating the flora and destroying trees during the rutting season, in parks and neighbors' yards.

Two deer operated upon last year didn't wake up after surgery, likely because of pre-existing health conditions. Two more died over the course of the year, both hit by cars on Interstate 75. Another female was nowhere to be found during this year's operation, though she had been caught on camera earlier in the year.

The team managed to sterilize 10 does this year, though it is believed there are three or four more that avoided capture.

Does that spell success?

Fewer deer were lured this year to baiting stations, areas around the neighborhood where food was set out to attract the deer and make them easier to dart. But the job proved more difficult this year because untagged females were intermingled with does that had been sterilized last year, identifiable with their ear tags.

Program organizers hope to see fewer deer each year – that would spell success. But this year, there were several factors at play that could have skewed results.

For one, the weather. Normally DeNicola likes to do this work in November or early December. It was so warm there was still foliage and there was a bumper crop of acorns – a favorite food for deer.

As a result, the animals weren't looking for a meal at the baiting stations.

The operation was postponed until January. But when things finally got underway, one and a half of the four-night operation got rained out.

Other indicators show the program may be working.

Last year, White Buffalo observed 24 to 28 fawns. This year they believe there were only four to eight.

Television stars

For two days, a production crew from Discovery Planet Canada followed the sterilization crews in Clifton this year.

The pilot program will be featured in a show called "Daily Planet," which airs on Discovery Channel in Canada and the Science Channel in the United States. Airing dates have not yet been set.

Otherwise, after surveys and reports are finished, it's on to year three. That means fundraising, again.

Costs were cut roughly in half this year from about $40,000 the first year to about $20,000 the second.

The savings came from darting fewer deer and cutting program costs, such as putting up the White Buffalo team in someone's home in the neighborhood this year, instead of a hotel.

The Clifton residents involved hope to keep whittling down the costs, partly by training local experts to volunteer for the jobs that cost money, such as the surgeries and research.